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ABSTRACT

Despite some initial hesitancy in the first half of the twentieth century to award associate degrees, since the end of World War II, the associate degree has become as widely accepted by two-year colleges as the baccalaureate degree is by four-year colleges. This is evidenced by the steady increase in the number of associate degrees awarded annually, the eagerness displayed by educators in the various disciplines to have degrees with their specialties attached, and the trend toward making a particular degree the criterion for transferability and occupational competency. The acceptance of the associate degree is also reflected in the various regulations governing the number, purposes, and standards for the degree. Furthermore, when allowances are made for the large number of part-time students attending two-year colleges and the high risk of the open door policy, the number of associate degree graduates is indeed significant. Thus, despite arguments for community-oriented, non-traditional education, the associate degree program remains a significant community college offering. This literature review provides a historical outline of the use of the associate degree since 1900, a discussion of the requirements for the most common associate degrees awarded, and statistical data on the number of degrees awarded between 1970 and 1976. A bibliography is included. (JP)

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JUNIOR COLLEGE RESOURCE REVIEW

May 1980

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John Lombardi

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Origins and Early Development

For some time after their beginnings in the early 1900s, junior colleges were concerned about the kind of recognition to bestow on their graduates. Some favored a diploma or a certificate of completion; others leaned toward a degree or title. Even after most settled on a degree for graduates of two-year programs, questions continued to be raised about the degree's value to the students, its acceptability by the public, and its usefulness to an institution with a steadily declining minority of full-time students.

Eells (1942) traces the origin of the associate degree to 1873 when an Associate in Science was awarded by the University of Durham but most junior college educators cited as a precedent the widely publicized University of Chicago practice (instituted in 1900) of awarding associate degrees in arts, literature and science to its students at the completion of the sophomore year. This practice, also followed by other senior institutions, became the model for the emerging junior colleges.

Typical is the 1900 catalog of the California College of Oakland (a Baptist institution) which announced that the College "has taken the same step" as the University of Chicago in creating "two new courses of study, the one leading to the degree of Associate of Arts, the other to the Associate of Letters" (Eells, 1942, p. 14). Thirty-one years later W.H. Snyder, founder and director of Los Angeles Junior (later City) College wrote that since "junior colleges affiliated with the University of Chicago have continuously kept the conferring of these degrees or titles ... we would be starting no unwarranted precedent" in conferring such titles or degrees (Eells, 1942, p. 17).

Snyder's statement on behalf of awarding degrees implies the existence of a considerable number of opponents and skeptics who, as late as 1931, were not convinced of the propriety of junior colleges awarding degrees. These doubters feared that awarding degrees would lead to a false evaluation of the curriculum and encourage some junior college educators to expand their programs to baccalaureate status. Until late in the 1930s the Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools of the Southern States would not accredit colleges that awarded degrees. Despite the hesitancy and opposition the number of colleges offering degrees and the number of degrees awarded increased each year. To its proponents the awarding of degrees to graduates of a college, even though called "junior," seemed as natural as identifying students as freshmen and sophomores.

Much of the educators' hesitancy in adopting the practice of awarding degrees was due to the uncertainty concerning their authority. Administrators of public colleges that emerged as extensions of high schools were probably wary of inciting hostility from the senior institutions and their state boards. Moreover, for many of the early institutions survival may have been a more urgent problem than the awarding of degrees. As Eells observed, well into the 1900s enrollments "were too small to be significant" (Eells, 1941, p. 50). Not before 1928 did total enrollment reach 50,000, which made the average about 124 students in each of the 408 colleges (Ward, 1948).

As the number of colleges increased so did the number offering the associate degree. In 1918 the number was 17; in 1928, 72; in 1942, 244. The 244 colleges in 1942 represented 40 percent of the 627 colleges; 51 percent of the public and 31 percent of the private colleges. By region the greatest acceptance was in California with a high of 83 percent, followed by the Northwest with 60 percent. In the Middle Atlantic states where junior colleges were few the percentage was 22 (Eells, 1942).

In 1942, of 193 colleges responding to a questionnaire, 162 stated that the associate's degree or title was given to graduates of terminal (vocational) curricula. Sixty-two respondents did not favor giving the same degree to graduates of terminal and liberal arts or transfer curricula (Eells, 1942). This issue loomed larger in the pre-World War II era than it does now since at that time the transfer program was more prestigious and much larger than the vocational. However, although 84 percent of the college's awarded the associate's degree to vocational students, the practice was to give special degrees. "Thirty percent of the junior colleges ... now offer from two to seven different associate's degrees each" (Eells, 1942, p. 34). In all Eells (1942) listed 34 degrees that were being offered in the early 1940s. His proposal of reducing the 34 to 10 was tantamount to an admission that sentiment for differentiation was too strong to overcome.

Just before the start of World War II, activity on behalf of the degree had become aggressive. Spurred by educators, accrediting associations and state boards rescinded their prohibition or adopted resolutions and regulations authorizing colleges to grant degrees. The Southern Association withdrew its prohibition sometime around 1941, and in 1942 the California Junior College Federation persuaded "the State Board of Education to authorize the issuance by public junior colleges of a degree, instead of a title..." (Eells, 1942, p. 18). Eells (1942) reported that in 1941 the associate's degree was authorized or permitted by 14 public agencies and nonpublic institutions; the associate's degree was used without express legal authorization in 16 states; only the title associate was authorized in 5 states and used without authorization in 9 states; in 7 states no degree was permitted, although title was used; in 2 states no degree was permitted, no title was used; and in 3 states there was no legal provision and no degree or title used. The Executive Committee of the American Association of Junior Colleges "recommended that junior colleges confer the Associate's degree or title upon their graduates ... and that the Associate be designated as a degree unless state law or regulations prevent" (Eells, 1942, p. 104).

Between 1910 and 1919 the number of degrees awarded was 944, between 1920 and 1929 the number soared to almost 12,000, from 1930 to 1934 it doubled to 24,000, and from 1930 to 1941 it passed the 50,000 mark. These statistics on the number of degrees awarded together with the data on the number of colleges awarding the degree make it clear that by 1941 the associate degree had strong support from students and educators.

Post-World War II

The post-World War II era marked the beginning of the second major growth period for the junior colleges. And along with other aspects the associate degree became one of its important characteristics. By 1956 Colvert noted that "recognition of the associate's degree ... gained wide favor in educational circles" and was authorized in all states except Virginia. He added: "The

granting of the associate's degree places the official stamp of approval on junior college education as definite collegiate accomplishment" (in Thornton, 1966, p. 50). The NCES report on degrees (Malitz, 1978), the studies by Tollefson for the Colorado State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education (Tollefson, 1978a, b; Colorado State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education, 1977), and Sullivan and Suritz (1978) for the American Council on Education are indications of the continued importance of the associate degree in the two-year colleges.

Among the approximately 50 degrees awarded today the Associate in Arts (A.A.), Associate in Science (A.S.), and the Associate in Applied Science (A.A.S.), are the most widely used (Colorado State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education, 1977; Sullivan and Suritz, 1978). Closely following in popularity are the Associate in General Studies (A.G.S.) and the Associate in Occupational Studies (A.O.S.). Other degrees are the Associate in Applied Business (A.A.B.) and large number of degrees for specific programs (Sullivan and Suritz, 1978). In Maryland programs leading to the A.A. (the only degree authorized) are labeled as transfer or occupational. California and Hawaii award the A.A. and A.S. Close to one-half of the states use 30 or more degrees (Sullivan and Suritz, 1978; Tollefson, 1978a).

Requirements for Degrees

The major requirements for the Associate degree have remained fairly constant over the years. They are influenced by the requirements for the lower division baccalaureate degree. Sixty semester credit-hours or 90 quarter credit-hours, with minor upper variations of 4 or 5 hours, are basic to all degrees (Sullivan and Suritz, 1978; Tollefson, 1978b). Where the A.A. and A.S. are primarily transfer degrees the general education requirements constitute half of the total required credit hours. For each degree the prescribed subjects in the other half (and to a lesser extent in the general education portion) followed closely the lower division requirements of the senior institutions the students plan to enter. Other degrees have similar components with different options among general education, major and electives (Sullivan and Suritz, 1978).

The A.A.S., usually a non-transfer degree, has a lower general education component — about one-fifth of the total graduation requirements. The rest of the program consists of courses that lead to full-time skilled or paraprofessional occupations. The A.G.S., used in Arizona, Colorado, Illinois, and Iowa, is designed for students who wish to plan their own programs within the general basic credit-hours requirement. The A.O.S., in use in New York and Ohio, is for students completing programs "with extremely high required proportions of skill courses" with no general education courses and no state-imposed course requirements (Tollefson, 1978b, p. 2).

In recent years efforts have been made to bring some order in the kinds of degrees colleges may award and to define the major purpose of each degree (Colorado State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education, 1977). Although the number of degrees may appear large the real number is much lower, if one groups the degrees according to the major designation arts, science, business, technology.

The desire to attach the name of the program completed to associate accounts for most of the proliferation. Associate in Business, in Agriculture, in Engineering Technology, in Public Service, in Individualized Study, in Occupational Education, in Labor Studies are illustrative of the specific degrees and account for two-thirds or more of the 50 degrees awarded. The proliferation is most pronounced in the occupational areas. It seems unlikely that present day educators will have any greater success in limiting the number to two or three than the Executive Committee of the American Association of Junior Colleges had in 1942 (Eells, 1942). Pressure to add new degrees is constant. Some ward off this pressure by adding the major on the diploma and transcript. (See Colorado State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education, 1977 and Sullivan and Suritz, 1978 for an excellent account of criteria for Associate Degree Programs.)

Statistical Data

The number of degrees given by public two-year colleges rose from 209,400 in 1970-71 to 337,500 in 1975-76 for a gain of 61 percent during the period. In 1975-76 the rate of gain more than doubled to 11 percent. Of the total degrees awarded during the 1971 to 1976 academic years the proportion in the arts and sciences or general education programs declined in every year from a high of 54.5 percent in 1971 to 42.5 percent in 1976, while the percentage in the occupational curriculums rose in every year from 45.5 percent to 57.5 percent (Malitz, 1978). The rate of growth of the curriculums in which degrees are awarded varied widely during the period: 195 percent for Public Service Related; 154 percent for Health Services Technologies; 118 percent for Natural Science; 106 percent for Non-science; 96 percent for Occupational; 50 percent for Mechanical/Engineering Technologies; and 21 percent for Arts and Sciences. Data Processing showed a loss of 5 percent (Malitz, 1978). These figures reflect the dramatic shift from the transfer and liberal arts baccalaureate-oriented programs to the occupational programs. In recent years the attractiveness of the latter programs has been enhanced by the large numbers of graduates accepted for transfer.

When measured against the millions of students enrolled, the hundreds of thousands of degrees seem small (one in 9). However, the 12 percent average yearly growth rate of degrees between 1970-71 and 1975-76 compares favorably with the 13 percent average yearly growth rate of enrollments between 1968 and 1973. Considering that full-time enrollment during this period was increasing at a slower pace than part-time enrollment the growth of degrees awarded is impressive (see table below). Moreover "the number of these degrees ... conferred ... has shown the largest numerical increase among all levels of degrees over the 6-year period" (Malitz, 1978, p. iii). It is pertinent to note that almost all private two-year colleges and many public and private four-year universities offer the associate degree. During 1974-75 they awarded more than 67 thousand associate degrees (Sullivan and Suritz, 1978).

Associates Degrees 1970-71 to 1975-76 and Enrollment 1968-1973

	1968	1973	1970-71	1975-76	Increase	Yearly Growth
Associate Degrees[1]			209,400	337,500	128,100	12.2%
Enrollment[2]	1,820,000	3,014,000			1,194,000	13.1%
Bachelor's Degrees[3]			850,000	926,000	76,000	1.8%

Sources: [1]Malitz, 1978, p. 9
[2]American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 1978, p. 2
[3]Malitz, 1978, p. 3

Importance of the Associate Degree

How important is the Associate degree to the students and to the educators? The amount of attention given to this aspect is usually limited and greatly over-shadowed by the attention given to the number and proportion of students who transfer. Perhaps, the attention given to transfer may be considered as including degrees since a large proportion of transfers obtain associate degrees.

Recent reports are giving more information on the number of degrees awarded (Mississippi State Department of Education, 1977; Adams and Roesler, 1977; Hawaii Community College System, 1978; Cumberland County College, 1978; Gold, 1979; Goodlet, 1979); and state legislatures and governing boards are establishing standards and guidelines for awarding degrees (Colorado State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education, 1977). Also, Virginia uses the average number of degrees conferred over a period of five years as a major criterion in the evaluation of degree program productivity (Meisinger and Riley, 1976); and in California where courses offered for credit

must meet one of three criteria, two involve the Associate degree (Meyer, 1979). Quite a number of four-year colleges by agreement with two-year colleges facilitate transfer by accepting a designated degree(s) as the principal criterion (Miller, 1976; Shea and Stannard, 1977). These agreements have helped increase the number of technical degrees awarded. In 1979 280 community and two-year technical institutes granted the A.A.S. to 16,000 graduates (Goodlet, 1979; see also Roesler and Jackson, 1975; Shea and Stannard, 1977). Funding for space in New Jersey is allocated in proportion to the transfer students who earn an A.A. the previous year (Miller, 1976).

The increase in number of degrees awarded (noted above) indicates that the degree continues to flourish. Obviously, students who already have a baccalaureate or higher degree do not seek an Associate and neither can one expect those who enroll for some specific short-term objective to do so. Full-time students enrolled in transfer and technical programs tend to seek the degrees. In Knoell's California studies about one in three transfer students obtained a degree, compared to less than 1 in 12 of the total students enrolled (California State Postsecondary Education Commission, 1979; Knoell and Others, 1976).

This activity attests to the importance attached to the associate degree. Also supporting the contention that the degree is important is the exceptional interest shown in the designations of the degree by educators and students in the technical vocational area. They consider the degree important enough to the welfare of their programs that they want the name of their specialty, e.g., business, agriculture, nursing, to be associated with the degree either immediately as associate in business, or as associate in applied science, major in agriculture, etc.

The growth in the number of degrees awarded during the 1970s should remove any doubt about its importance to the students who complete a two-year program. The small proportion of students who obtain a degree does not warrant the assumption that the degree has no validity. No one draws the conclusion that because part-time university extension students do not obtain baccaulaureate degrees they are not valued. One should not expect many among the large groups of part-time two-year college students to obtain degrees. Many of them already have one and others have objectives — personal, recreational, academic or occupational — that may be achieved in less than two years. The statistics on the low proportion of entering students who obtain the degrees is balanced by the increases in the number of associate degrees awarded each year and the constancy of the ratio of degrees to enrollment in recent years.

This success causes apprehension among those who have been advocating a new mission for the community college, one that places equal or greater value on community education (community services, continuing education, adult education) than on the traditional academic, degree-oriented transfer and occupational education. The fear is exacerbated by restrictions on the funding of non-credit or non-degree courses and the contraction of such courses during financial crisis. In general, administrators are most concerned about this development; faculty favor it (Meyer, 1979). Gooder (President of Santa Barbara City College, Ca.) expressed the administrator's point of view in a position paper "California's Community Colleges: Promises to Keep." He maintained that "college degrees have less currency than they had in 1972" and hoped that a study prompted by the Legislature "will serve as a basis for adapting post-secondary education to current and future needs of people rather than as a rationale for insisting that new kinds of students with new kinds of needs adapt to traditional perceptions of post-secondary education" (1976, pp. C-2, C-3). More moderately, Sweeney and Faul in a second position paper, "The Associate Degree — For What? For Whom? Why?", concluded: "The associate degree provides a goal and an opportunity for *some* Community College students. To eliminate it would be to rob the Community College of constructive form; to demand it of all would be to cheapen the degree and pervert the institution that grants it" (1976, pp. D-1, D-2).

Conclusion

Since the end of World War II the associate degree has become as widely accepted by junior colleges as the baccalaureate is by four-year colleges. This is evident in the steady increase in the number of associate degrees awarded annually, the eagerness displayed by educators in the various disciplines to have degrees with their specialties attached, and the trend toward making a particular degree (or degrees) the criterion for transferability and for occupational competency. Above all the various laws and regulations relating to the number, the purposes, and the standards of degrees has given them not only legitimacy but recognition comparable to that attained by the degrees awarded by four-year colleges and universities. When allowances are made for the large number of part-time students, the high risks involved in the Open Door admission policy, and the large number of students enrolled in less than two-year programs, the statistical data on degrees are encouraging to those who favor their award.

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Staff Writer

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